

you know about this intimately
but this is the library report

Censorship in Bartlesville

A Report of the Oklahoma Library Association Committee on Intellectual Freedom¹

THE SCOPE of the committee's operational area is stated in the covering transmittal memorandum of Jan. 8, 1951. In brief it was to examine and report on censorship in the Bartlesville [Okla.] Public Library and upon no other aspects of this case.

The committee's method of operation was varied. Interviews were held with individuals conversant with the details, newspaper accounts were considered, one member of the committee made a trip to Bartlesville, and the problem was discussed at length with a number of librarians. The committee made extensive efforts to get all information available and confined itself to no one source in carrying on its work. We must also state that this entire situation in Bartlesville is so befogged with emotions and defensive attitudes (undoubtedly well meaning and sincere) that it is difficult to get a clear view. We have taken sufficient time and pains to lessen this disadvantage.

A self-named and self-constituted Citizens' Committee of Bartlesville appears to have instigated the difficulty. It first objected to a limited interracial program carried on by the local YWCA. The group met with no success in that encounter because the YWCA Board of Directors and almost all of the membership staunchly supported the program as a means of creating amicable and just race relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

The next effort of the Citizens' Committee was directed toward the public li-

brary. Ruth Brown, librarian for over 30 years, was accused of keeping subversive literature in the library.

Here it is necessary to digress in order to mention that Miss Brown advocates fair treatment for Negroes and a chance for them to have an even opportunity to advance on their own merits. The thought naturally occurs that this was perhaps the Citizens' Committee's actual reason for the attack on the public library, but after the YWCA episode it adopted the device of claiming that the library contained subversive writings. This shift of emphasis is of interest in the case. References to this phase of Miss Brown's pursuits may be found in the

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."—John Milton, *Areopagitica*.

Bartlesville Record for Sept. 17, 1950, and in *The Tulsa Tribune* for Sept. 16, 1950. According to the latter account the mayor stated this activity of Miss Brown's to be only casual to the matter of the library's contents.

The Citizens' Committee appeared at the Bartlesville Board of Commissioners meeting on Feb. 16, 1950, and made its complaint (*The Tulsa Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1950) and the Board of Commissioners referred the complaint to the Library Board. On Feb. 23, 1950, the Board of Commissioners directed the Library Board to investigate the matter and also requested the Citizens' Committee to make an examination of the library (*Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, Mar. 7, 1950). The Citizens' Committee had named *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *Soviet Russia Today* as subversive magazines and objected to their inclusion in the library's periodical collection. In 1950 *The Nation* was 85 years old and *The New Republic* was 36 years old. Both are old-line liberal periodicals and have an interesting and

¹ A report submitted to the president and Executive Board of the Oklahoma Library Association on Jan. 8, 1951, by the OLA Committee on Intellectual Freedom (Frances Kennedy, chairman; Mrs. Mary Hays Marable; Ralph Hudson; Esther M. McHuer, president, ex officio). On February 3, at the 1951 ALA Midwinter Meeting, the ALA Council adopted a resolution submitted by the ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom and previously endorsed by the ALA Executive Board, protesting the discharge of the librarian of Bartlesville, Okla., after 30 years of service. The resolution stated, in part: "The allegations were based on the library's holdings of the *Nation*, *New Republic* and *Soviet Russia Today*. The ALA does not defend any specific publication, but in view of the responsibility of libraries to provide information on all sides of controversial issues, this incident is an infringement of the Library Bill of Rights, the official statement of policy of the association. . . ."

These were all ways of buttable not for their leftest articles (many of these were critical and that's the problem but because certain teachers used them exclusively and did not try to give a well rounded approach. "S.R.T." we kept on request because it was a soft voice and gave an entire wrong picture as they do

provocative point of view, and are worth examining, whether the reader agrees with them or not. Both have made errors of judgment (what periodical has not?) and both have admitted errors. But both have also been right many times. We understand that *The Nation* and *The New Republic* are now both available, but only on call. They are not on the open periodical shelves. *Soviet Russia Today* is frankly pro-Soviet. It makes no pretense of being otherwise. It is a means of discovering exactly what the Soviet line of thought is and in their own words. Quite often the fallacies and misstatements it prints are so obviously in error as to be ludicrous.

The Library Board met in special session on Mar. 1, 1950, with the Citizens' Committee, and discussed the library's acquisition program with the committee members. Each group made a report to the Board of Commissioners at its meeting on Mar. 6, 1950 (*Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, Mar. 7, 1950).

The Mar. 6, 1950 meeting of the Board of Commissioners was reported to be a near riot. The Library Board appears to have had little opportunity, perhaps none, to state its views or position. The Library Board and its supporters were the targets for abuse and name callings. The mayor and vice-mayor (the present mayor) both made speeches. The mayor adjourned the meeting suddenly. (*Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, Mar. 7, 1950.) The Board of Commissioners ordered the Library Board at the Mar. 6, 1950 meeting to make a full report on the library.

In May both the Library Board and the Citizens' Committee filed reports. These reports are carried in full in the *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise* of May 28, 1950. There were sharp differences in the reports. The Library Board took the position that a public library should present full information on the issues of today and should serve the whole community. Here is the fifth paragraph of its report.

It should be clearly understood that the Board's determination that any publication is suitable for inclusion in the City Library does not imply approval or advocacy of the views expressed in the book or periodical in question, either by the Board, or by its individual mem-

bers. The Board believes that a policy of selection which would confine the Library's contents to material consonant with the opinions of the Board or any of its members, or of any other citizen or group of citizens in the community, would be subversive of the basic principles which differentiate the constitutional government of the United States from the governments of authoritarian states.

The Citizens' Committee report expressed a view contrary to this belief. This is stated in the third paragraph from the end of its report.

These citizens are of the opinion that the presentation of contrasting points of view on controversial subjects does not require the surrender of our libraries to fifth column invasion. The freedom of the press has never been interpreted to tolerate the printing of counterfeit money. Counterfeit literature, designed to defame and destroy the heritage of American freedom, should be exposed instead of tolerated.

On June 14, 1950, the Board of Commissioners adopted a new Public Library Ordinance and repealed the 1911 Ordinance (Article VI, 1924 *Revised Ordinance*) under which the library had been operated. The new ordinance (No. 1453) had an emergency clause appended which stated it would be in effect "from and after its passage, approval and publication." It was published in the *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise* on June 16, 1950.

The new ordinance allowed the appointment of a librarian and assistant with the approval of the Board of Commissioners and also provided that any employee of the library could be removed at any time by the Board of Commissioners. All purchases of books and periodicals must have the approval of the Library Board and the Board of Commissioners must approve all rules and regulations.

Acting under this ordinance the Board of Commissioners removed the Library Board on July 10, 1950, and appointed a new board. On July 25, 1950, Miss Brown was called by the mayor to attend a closed meeting. Miss Brown reports that she answered all questions concerning the library and her work fully and promptly. However, she refused to answer any questions concerning her personal life unless they were placed in writing and her answers made in the same

manner. This procedure was not permitted but many of the questions asked her were of a personal nature. She yet refused to answer unless the questions and her answers were written. She stated that she was concerned lest her answers, and the questions also, be twisted out of context. This meeting continued for an hour and a half and no stenographic report was made of it. One hour later Miss Brown was notified by the city manager, by telephone, that her services were terminated.

A group of citizens requested the reason for Miss Brown's dismissal at the Aug. 7, 1950 meeting of the Board of Commissioners. The mayor indicated that neither the magazine controversy nor the racial issue was the cause for her discharge, but insubordination was the reason. When asked to give examples of her insubordination he was unable to recall any.

On Sept. 12, 1950, Miss Brown and Mrs. Darlene Essary, a former member of the Library Board, filed suit in the District Court of Washington County. They contend that Ordinance No. 1453 is invalid because it is in conflict with the laws of the state of Oklahoma. The District Judge for Washington County certified his disqualification in this case on Oct. 2, 1950, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Oklahoma appointed a judge from another district to hear the matter. On Nov. 9, 1950, the District Court ruled against Miss Brown and Mrs. Essary. They appealed to the Supreme Court of Oklahoma on Dec. 11, 1950.

In addition to the newspaper accounts mentioned above the following ones were published: *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, Sept. 13 and Oct. 2, 1950; *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), Nov. 5, Nov. 9, and Nov. 10, 1950; *The Denver Post*, Aug. 17, 1950; *Tulsa Daily World*, Sept. 13 and Oct. 3, 1950; *The Tulsa Tribune*, Sept. 14 and Sept. 18, 1950. The editorial in *The Tulsa Tribune* for Sept. 14 is a fine statement for the cause of freedom of expression.

The Oklahoma Library Association Committee on Intellectual Freedom believes firmly that public libraries are a safeguard of our nation's freedoms. The maintenance and strengthening of this bulwark requires that libraries have freedom—freedom of

acquisition, freedom of access by all people, and freedom to give complete information. A fully informed citizenry will not allow its liberties to vanish. Censorship of libraries hits at the very heart of these concepts. How can freedom be secure if freedom be denied?

This nation is built, and is building, on free inquiry and expression. Its political, economic and cultural institutions are all products of this analysis. Its attitude of leaving the herd, of experimenting and testing has resulted in great achievements. This can come only from freedom of thought and expression. Truth will emerge from a free and uninhibited clash of ideas.

The Society for Philosophical Inquiry, a scholarly organization, recently disbanded after 85 years of existence. One of the society's officers stated that people no longer appeared to be interested in free inquiry. If true, such a condition can but ruin us and leave us the prey of any claptrap theory that may be presented in a seemingly palatable form. This condition is well explored by George Orwell in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We need more free and honest inquiry, and more intellectual honesty. We need our groups for philosophical inquiry.

The struggle for freedom of expression is never ending. There are always those who would deny it and they quickly see and seize their opportunities in periods of tension. As librarians we have no choice but to oppose this else we fail the ideals of our profession and of scholarship. (We are quite well aware of the distinction between freedom and license.) We may not prevail, but unless we speak clearly for these principles we are without integrity or fiber. We have great examples in Milton, Mill, Jefferson, Holmes, Bagehot and Bacon. There are many others and all raised their objections in plain terms to the curtailment of free inquiry and expression.

As Howard Mumford Jones states in his *Primer of Intellectual Freedom*, "Teaching is not indoctrination." Libraries disseminate information which is a form of teaching and a form of expression. They do not indoctrinate. They serve all segments of a society, not any one political, social, age, economic, racial or religious group. It is

difficult to remain in an intellectual vacuum, if not impossible. Ideas of all types sprout in profusion. Most, if not all, require questioning and analysis. Human beings, if given a chance—especially American citizens—have a faculty of arriving at a good judgment. They may wander for a time, they may do foolish acts, but, if given an honest opportunity at access to full information the odds are in favor of their reaching a decent conclusion. And even if they should not arrive at such a conclusion, when given complete knowledge, who are we to impose our wills upon them? We cannot adopt the enemy's tactics and not be smeared with his tar. We cannot defend freedom by the use of oppression. If we do we have joined the oppressor's ranks.

The majority governs in this nation, but the majority must do so with tolerance, feeling, and sense, and not, in the manner of a great beast, crush the dissident groups. And a reactionary minority within the governing majority cannot be permitted (shielded by the majority's power) to harass and persecute a nonconformist faction by vilification, or by pressure on the majority to incite it to suppress the objects of their dislike.

This committee concludes that the action of the Citizens' Committee in Bartlesville, Okla., constitutes a violation of the Bartlesville Public Library's integrity and is a grave infraction of the freedom of inquiry, thought and expression. It is an act of intolerance.

Librarians are among the very first to oppose any form of dictatorship be it communism, fascism or nazism. We know too well that it means the end of any freedom of expression. We remember clearly that Hitler caused the libraries of Germany to be ransacked and gutted—their contents mainly destroyed in less than three and one half months after he became chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933. We cannot believe that Russian libraries, no matter what *Soviet Russia Today* may say, contain anything but a collection of laudatory exercises on the Soviet regime, and are totally valueless to serve a people struggling from the deadliness of centuries of oppression. We know well what has happened to libraries in other dictator-governed nations. They provide

more pap for a cowed and suppressed people. If any good library collections do exist they are closed to all but the elite of the governing power.

Knowing this we realize that such a political creed means our extinction and we oppose it completely. We know this because we were born and we live in a nation of free public libraries. We have seen the clash of ideas; we have had access to free inquiry. We are well aware that we must have the opportunity to discover who is our enemy, to know his beliefs and his tactics in order to oppose him successfully. The Citizens' Committee would deny this to the citizens of Bartlesville. It would require them to read only that which it considered proper. It would leave them in ignorance.

We can only infer, in view of the published record, that Ruth Brown was unjustly and cavalierly discharged because of her private beliefs and because of her professional belief in free libraries. Had she been professionally unfit to be the librarian then Bartlesville is somewhat tardy in discovering it only after 30 years. We feel that the Bartlesville Public Library was made the scapegoat for a misguided group, that the reading matter in the library was not the primary cause for the complaint, and that censorship of the library was used as a weapon against Miss Brown. She has suffered the loss of her position, but the city of Bartlesville has suffered more. It has transgressed against the freedom of its library and thereby transgressed upon its distinction as an institution for free public information. It has denied its patrons free access to reading matter and the free acquisition of these materials by the library.

We know that our protests cannot remedy the situation, and that this is properly a matter that Bartlesville should rectify itself. But we shall continue to state our objections to censorship of libraries clearly and straightforwardly for we are a part of the whole and if a library anywhere is harmed we are harmed. These beliefs we shall hold with faith and fortitude or we lose our integrity as representatives of a scholarly profession and our standing as free persons. Many of our liberties rest on freedom of expression and these liberties we must retain else we are lost.